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FIRST CONTACT: AN AUSTRALIAN VISITS SHANANA'S CAMP

Fifteen years ago, 6 Australians were killed in Timor by Indonesian troops while trying to report the Indonesian invasion. No one has since dared make the hazardous trek to the mountains to speak directly to the only people not under Djakarta's rule, and bring their voice to the outside. A few week's ago, an Australian citizen, Robert Domm, made the trip for the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, interviewed the guerilla commander, Shanana Gusmao, and brought back six cassette tapes. ABC radio producer, Mark Aarons, has written this exclusive report.

The guerilla officer pointed vaguely and said encouragingly, 'we're very close now, it's just up ahead'. The Timorese knew that his Australian campanion was just about done for. For the past 20 kilometres the security unit had insisted that they travel at a forced march. The rugged mountains were literally teeming with Indonesian troops patrolling the dense jungle. They knew that the resistance leader, Shanana Gusmao, was in the area and desperately wanted to capture or kill him.

By then Robert Domm was already exhausted, dripping with sweat and covered in a thick coat of mountain dust. Domm squinted into the late afternoon light and silently groaned. He looked up and all he could see was 'this mini-Mattahorn' covered

with jungle. It seemed totally inaccessible. From where the small group was standing at the foot of the mountain it was impossible to tell that anyone was there, let alone how to get up it. 'For the guerilla to say it was just up there made it sound very easy. But getting up that mountain was no easy task', Domm recalled a few days later. But they did it, and eventually arrived at Shanana's well hidden and constructed base camp. The first direct contact in 15 years with the Timorese military leadership was made just before 6.00PM, Thursday 27 September 1990.

A few hours earlier, Domm and his battle hardened bodyguards had met just outside a tiny Timorese hamlet. Domm's first impression was that they were a somewhat rag-tag band. This was the security unit assigned to escort him through the mountains and protect his life. 'They'd arranged a welcoming reception in the form of a formal military stand to attention and presenting of arms. I have to say frankly that my first impression was that they were somewhat sloppy.' Their timing was out, some putting their guns on their left shoulders, others on the right. They had none of the regimented, military precision one would expect in a disciplined army. They seemed awkward and strangely incongruous. Although they all wore uniforms, no two were alike. Some wore 'Afro' hairstyles, and each was distinctive, far removed from a conventional army's neatness and uniformity. 'My first reaction was "oh no, I thought these guys were a bit better than this". It was like they'd sent out a younger version of

Dad's Army to protect me.'

Domm reflected on the traditional Timorese ritual that had occurred shortly after they had set out from Dili. Suddenly the car had stopped and one of the men asked him to unbutton his shirt. His companions at this stage were members of the local underground. One produced a green leaf, dipped his finger into a supposedly magical substance and drew a symbol on Domm's chest and forehead, and then repeated the ritual on the others. He explained that 'now the Indonesians won't see us, we'll be invisible to them'. Although Domm joined in with good humour, he quietly hoped that they were not putting too much faith in this tradition.

After 2 days travelling through the inaccessible mountains, the Australian thought twice. They had passed by thousands of Indonesian troops, on occasions within metres of them, 'but they never saw me'. Perhaps the tradition had worked, after all. More likely, the success of Domm's mission is explained by the extraordinary, military-like precision with which the East Timorese resistance organised the mission. Domm is the first outsider to gain an overview of the resistance's organisation; others have known parts of the network, but he saw first hand how the underground operates in the Indonesian-controlled towns and villages, and how the guerillas live in the bush.

Once out in the bush, Domm quickly realised that his initial

impression of the guerillas was quite wrong. In the mountains, they rapidly demonstrated their skills as a guerilla army. 'They don't march up and down in military parades, they're not like the Indonesian army which is trained like that', Domm reports. 'But in terms of being able to get through the mountains at great speed, take the best vantage points, liaise with the local people and seize the initiative from the Indonesian troops, they are a formidable force.'

The inhospitable terrain is in fact the guerillas' best friend. When he reached their camp on top of the 'mini-Mattahorn', Domm could not see it, even from about 10 metres. 'Suddenly Shanana Gusmao emerged, and one of the guerillas said "there's our leader". I looked up and realised we were there. So you can see how difficult it is for the Indonesians to find them.' The last stretch was very steep, and by then he was on his hands and knees. He struggled to his feet, shook Shanana's hand and said: 'it's been a long time, sir, 15 years'. The guerilla legend smiled shyly and simply replied, 'yes'.

'The history of the moment struck me immediately', Domm told me a few days later. 'We'd had to climb this mountain, struggling to the top, totally exhausted. That last climb epitomised the difficulty of communications. It's a struggle all the way, just to get to these people.' For 15 years no outsider had made it. 'For me as a European going to their base camp, it

was almost like first contact with a white man. They were like a lost tribe which had been cut off from the world, cut off in time, and suddenly this strange being had entered their world, this strange white man. And they were very shy, as you'd expect a lost tribe to be.' After a while, this wore off, and they relaxed a bit. Although Domm shared a few jokes with them, he was glad he was not fighting them. 'They are all very tough, even the young, baby faced guys. The older men who've been up there for many years were clearly very hardened soldiers.'

Work on making direct contact with Shanana had been underway at the ABC for quite a few years. Earlier this year, I met Robert Domm at a function, and we talked all night about East Timor. As a young seaman in the 1970s he had travelled many times to the Portuguese colony, and when Djakarta 'normalised' the territory in January 1989, he was one of the first to take advantage of the easing of travel restrictions and visit as a tourist.

Shortly after returning from his recent gruelling ordeal, Domm explained his motive for doing something that could have ended in his own death. 'I felt it was important that the true story of East Timor be finally told to the world. For 13 years after the invasion, it was a closed society, and only a few selected journalists were permitted to visit selected areas. When you speak to the people today and you hear the countless stories of mass killings, torture, arbitrary arrests and

executions, you can't help but feel that this is a story which must be told, and has not been adequately told to date.'

Domm's three weeks in Indonesia and Timor were extremely psychologically demanding. 'I was well aware that 6 Australian media people had been killed by Indonesian troops, and that they are anxious to prevent information getting out from the guerillas. I knew that I'd have to evade the Indonesian army to get to the mountains. Knowing this, there was a real possibility that I, and the resistance people travelling with me, wouldn't make it back. I had to reconcile myself to the real possibility that I may have been killed, and that's a very difficult thing to do.'

Domm found a very different situation from that portrayed by the Generals in Djakarta. 'The Indonesians claim that the situation is normal. But it's one of the most abnormal societies I've ever been to. I expected a lot of resistance, but I never realised that it was so well organised and so extensive. In Dili and many other towns there were numerous people involved in the operation to smuggle me to the mountains. Once out of Dili there were people everywhere, monitoring our movements at every stage, organising and scouting ahead to ensure that we got to the army's base camp and returned safely. That really opened my eyes, because there are over 10,000 troops in that tiny country. We went through them everywhere in the mountains, and it was only that local network of civilians which saved our skins. The small

group with me could not have protected me from that sort of military power. Our only protection was the local people, and their bush telegraph. It's all word of mouth and foot out there.'

They desperately needed this network to evade the numerous Indonesian patrols, especially the small, well camouflaged and mobile patrols hiding in the jungle. 'I saw them everywhere on the roads, patrolling on foot, crammed into military transport trucks, and travelling in armoured vehicles. Once off the beaten tracks they were also everywhere, and although I couldn't see them, the Timorese could. I was a bit like a blind person. I could have walked right over them without knowing because they blend in so effectively. But the resistance knew where they were, because information was passed to the security unit by the local people.'

To ensure Domm's safety, the guerillas had spread out all along the route. Like the Indonesians, they were simply everywhere. 'They would spring up out of trees, and the security unit knew exactly where they people were hiding. I would suddenly see a guerilla talking to a tree, and I'd look around and a soldier would suddenly appear from nowhere.' Shanana's base camp seemed to be ringed with this protective cordon of fighters and peasants, all looking for signs of an Indonesian advance. If one had come, resistance runners would have swiftly brought the news.

The mountain stronghold had been dug out of the side of the mountain and small, temporary huts erected to give a little protection. It was a military camp, well positioned and camouflaged. 'They are a highly disciplined army', Domm says, 'and every soldier had a gun, mostly captured from the Indonesians, because they were American weapons which had been supplied to the Indonesian army.'

Domm's stay at the camp was by necessity very brief, as a clockwork-like plan had been developed to spirit him back to Dili. It was a 'no nonsense' 18 hours. After a short 'breather and a drink of water', they got down to business. 'We started the interview almost immediately. It was about 6 o'clock in the evening and the light was fading fast. The first session went through to about 1 o'clock in the morning', interrupted only by a brief meal. Even this was unexpected, for they served Domm 'cakes, sates and noodles, and what appeared to be venison meats. They prepared coffee, we had a glass of whiskey at one stage, and they served the meals on glass plates. This was a special occasion for them. The only problem was that I wasn't hungry.'

The guerilla leader's demeanour changed noticeably through the interview. At first somewhat shy and awkward, he loosened up and relaxed. 'He hadn't met any outsider for 15 years, he seemed to have lost an element of the "civilised world", if I can call it that. He'd never done an interview before and didn't know what to expect, but he was an articulate, intelligent and very

thoughtful man, who answered the questions fully and frankly and very spontaneously. He was very honest, admitting past mistakes and deficiencies. His only reluctance to answer questions was that he wanted to avoid exposing the underground organisation and put people at risk.'

The thing that struck Domm most about his host was how out of place he seemed in his surroundings. 'He doesn't seem to belong in the mountains, he's not the type of person you'd expect to spend 15 years there. You'd expect to find him drinking coffee and discussing politics in a sidewalk cafe in metropolitan Lisbon. He's clearly a well read man, and his knowledge of world events was very good. He was gentle and humorous, but also a very hard and strict man. His army is a strict hierarchy and he's the head, his word must be obeyed. He seems to be cut in that mould of the classic, charismatic Latin guerilla leader. What struck me was that combination of intellectual and soldier.'

It was easy now for Domm to understand the reverence with which he had heard Shanana's name mentioned back in Dili. 'The Timorese see him as a living symbol of their resistance. To them, he's a precious item, in that Shanana is there in the mountains, and the Indonesians haven't been able to capture him in 15 years. Despite all their best efforts, throwing as many troops as they could at him, they can't get him. With all their sophisticated US technology, he continues to survive and mount attacks against them. The people in Dili believe there's hope in

the hills, it's not all bleak, they haven't been totally subjugated, because their leader is up there. That's the way they see him, sort of like a beacon. He's keeping the flame of freedom alive.'

At midday on 28 September, Domm left the camp to make his dangerous return to Dili. As he packed his small shoulder bag, he looked at the tiny Sony Walkman I had given him to record the interview. The symbolism seemed somehow tragic. 'I thought "what's on that little bit of plastic and metal represents 15 years of struggle and resistance. They'd put this major effort into doing it, involving around 200 people directly and many more indirectly to get me in and out alive, just for 6 lousy cassette tapes.'

The return to Dili cast new light on the 10 agonising days Domm had spent there, waiting under the watchful eye of Indonesian security for his trip to begin. He understood much more clearly just how well organised the Timorese resistance are. While the Indonesians have 'opened up' the country, this has given the underground time and space to organise. 'The situation in Dili has eased since I was there in January last year. Then, people were reluctant to talk to you or even look at you. They are a lot more friendly and relaxed now, and willing to talk.' But the message was far from relaxed. 'Countless people would suddenly show me their scars in the middle of friendly conversations. Some had bullet wounds in the chest, others

explained that the scars came from electric shocks to their legs and arms. Others were legless, and claimed they'd been hacked off with machetes by Indonesian troops.' Domm was soon hardened to these horrors.

Perhaps the most remarkable insight he gained was of the younger generation, the children who never lived under Portuguese rule, and have only known the Indonesians. 'They've made great efforts to convince the young that they've brought improvements', Domm said. 'But you can't kill a father and then say to the son you can now go to a school built by the killers, and expect the son to be grateful.' In Dili, countless primary, secondary and tertiary students approached him, 'because they felt they could talk to me, as a European. None of them accepts Indonesian rule.'

From his many conversations with the local people, he discovered 'a dark underside to Dili', a daily battle between the security apparatus, especially military intelligence, and the underground. 'From what I saw, Indonesian intelligence puts an intense effort into turning people into double agents or informants. So the dark underside, which a tourist sitting in a nice hotel could easily never see, is this continual struggle. It's a nasty, violent, dark underside to the place.'

After a few days, Domm discovered that there was an unofficial curfew in the town, following the recent demonstration

at a Catholic ceremony, and night time attacks by Timorese on Indonesians. In response, 'the Indonesian military has formed a new death squad, called the Ninja. They dress in black and cover their heads with black hoods, visit peoples' homes late at night and early in the morning, and take them away, apparently never to be seen again.'

As far as Robert Domm could tell, the Indonesians need every weapon of terror and surveillance to keep the underground in check. 'In Dili, it's a classic situation of popular resistance; people in the army, intelligence, police, shops and hotels, all ostensibly participating in Indonesian rule are all really resistance people, who are regularly providing intelligence to the guerillas in the mountains.'

It was only on his return to the capital that Domm appreciated just how important the 'men in the bush' are to the towns. In the eyes of the Timorese living under the Indonesians, 'the guerillas are not bowing down to anybody. They live that hard life, but they're standing tall, as they see it. What struck me the most going back to Dili, straight from the guerillas' camp, was a sense of revulsion towards the Indonesians. They suddenly seemed ugly, crass and obscene in their attitudes and behaviour. I have Indonesian friends there who I get on well with, and they are basically good people. But they suddenly struck me as being quite ugly, and I wanted to tell them to get out of this place. They've stolen the country,

pushed the real people away and taken over the towns. But those real people are up there in the mountains, waiting to come back one day. My impression of the Timorese when I arrived back in Dili was also interesting. In order to survive, they have to show deference, smile and say hullo to the Indonesians. They may well be hardline resistance members, actively working every day against the Indonesians, but publicly they bow and nod and maintain the illusion of being friends. But the people in the towns know that no one has to bow and scrape in the resistance-held areas just to survive.'

Back in Sydney, Robert Domm has had time to think about the lonely, isolated life led by the tough mountain guerillas he met in East Timor's rugged bush. He has thought long and hard about Prime Minister Hawke's recent statements of support for the United Nations' and Australian roles in the Gulf Crisis. When our ships left Sydney in mid-August, Hawke pledged Australia's support to the principle 'that big countries cannot invade small neighbours and get away with it.' Domm has compared that with Foreign Minister Senator Gareth Evans's claim that there is no international legal obligation for Australia to refuse recognition of the forcible incorporation of East Timor into Indonesia. 'The world is a pretty unfair place', Evans says, 'littered with examples of acquisition by force which have proved irrevrsible.' Yet the two situations have remarkable parallels: both Kuwait and East Timor have been forcibly occupied by far more powerful neighbours, although the loss of life and

violations of human rights in Timor is far worse than in Kuwait; both occupations have been declared illegal by the UN, yet Australia stands by our international commitments in Kuwait, and has abandoned the Timorese to their cruel fate.

And so Domm remembered Shanana's resignation when asked about possible peace solutions. 'He's made numerous proposals to the Indonesians and they never even listen, let alone respond. All they do is send in more troops to try to kill him and his followers. So his attitude is that they just have to keep fighting. But they are prepared to pay that price for as long as it takes, and there's a large reserve of people waiting to go to the mountains if they're called on. When you look at the situation, at the fact that they have survived in the mountains for 15 years without any outside support and they are still launching attacks against the Indonesians, then you can just see that the resistance will go on indefinitely, for another 15 or even 35 years, unless the Indonesians show flexibility, and learn that the way to resolve conflict is not to crush their enemies, but to negotiate peace. And that is what Shanana was asking, his message to the world was to pressure Indonesia to resolve the conflict, to show flexibility. It's not asking so much, I think, for the world, and particularly Australia, to pressure Indonesia to resolve the conflict, because these people don't want to keep fighting. But they're forced to, or face being wiped out as a nation, as a people.'

For the East Timorese, the struggle for survival is getting harder. Transmigration from Indonesia, and a decade and a half of increasingly sophisticated and brutal warfare are taking their toll. In the next few weeks a special UN mission is scheduled to visit the territory, which the UN still recognises as Portuguese. After 15 years of almost complete isolation, it will be the first UN visit since the Indonesians refused free access to the UN Special Mission in early 1976. There is a glimmer of hope, an opening for the Timorese in the post-Cold War world. Both sides of the 'Iron Curtain' have previously turned their backs on the Timorese Holocaust, and refused effective help.

However, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait has also brought international attention to the plight of the Timorese. According to long time resistance spokesperson, Jose Ramos Horta, there are signs of real action among world leaders. Horta recently met with senior Italian officials who told him that the European Community was embarrassed by their vocal stand in support of Kuwait, and their indifference to East Timor. Shortly afterwards, the Italian Foreign Minister, speaking on behalf of the European Community, raised East Timor in the UN General Assembly. And in Tokyo there are also indications of a new approach. At a joint press conference with Portuguese Prime Minister Silva, Japan's Prime Minister Kaifu expressed his government's strong support for a mediated solution to the Timorese impasse.

Robert Domm risked his life to bring the Timorese guerillas' message to world attention. From the comfort and safety of Australia, their existence seems a million miles away. 'For 15 years they've only known the mountains, and while they listen to the world on their short wave radios, the world hasn't listened to them. The Indonesians have denied them the right to communicate for all that time, and still do.' The Australian government has actively assisted this censorship, refusing to accept radio messages originating from the resistance, and seizing several two way radio connections established by pro-Timorese Australians.

It is an ironic situation. While virtually no voices were raised at all in the Federal Parliament when it recently approved an agreement with Djakarta to jointly exploit Timor's mineral wealth, in Europe, Japan and Washington there are hundreds of parliamentarians actively supporting and lobbying for a just solution. Next December, a major symposium on the question will be held at Oxford University, to be followed by a Ford Foundation forum in Washington next April. As Horta remarked with some cynicism, 'not one single Labor MP even spoke out against Australia's immoral policy on the Timor Gap Treaty, let alone voted against it.' It is time for Canberra to come clean on our responsibilities towards our tiny neighbour, where an earlier generation of Timorese laid down their lives to protect Australians from our Japanese enemy in the dark year of 1942.